

WORKING PAPER -JCS-J-3
4 November 1965

RESUME OF AIR STRIKE
PROGRAMS AGAINST THE DRV

Objectives

1. a. The basic objective of military actions against Vietnam is to apply pressures to cause the DRV to cease and desist in supporting and directing the insurgencies in South Vietnam and Laos.

b. The specific objectives of the ROLLING THUNDER air strike program against North Vietnam are (1) to reduce the DRV capabilities to support the above insurgencies, and (2) to exact a progressively mounting price for their continuing to do so.

c. The foregoing statements of objectives may be found, with some variations of language, in a succession of formal recommendations by the Joint Chiefs of Staff dating back at least to November 1964, the most recent of which is dated 2 September 1965, and all of which are believed available to appropriate authorities.

Program

2. First air strikes against the DRV were the PIERCE ARROW strikes of 5 August 1964, reprisal for the PT attacks against the US destroyers in the Gulf of Tonkin. Only one fixed target (Vinh POL, JCS No. 50) was authorized and struck; all remaining strike effort was specifically directed against DRV naval craft in base areas at Hong Gay, Phuc Loi, Quang Khe, and in the Loc Chau estuary.

3. Next strikes were in February 1965, when two reprisal actions were undertaken in response to Viet Cong attacks on US installations in South Vietnam. These reprisals, FLAMING DART I and FLAMING DART II, struck the Dong Hoi Barracks (JCS No. 33) on 7 February, the Chap Le Barracks (JCS 39, southeast of Dong Hoi) on the 8th and again on 11 February, and

GROUP 3
DOWNGRADED AT 12 YEAR INTERVALS;
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Chan Hoa Barracks (JCS 24, Dong Hoi area) on 11 February.

4. No "target of opportunity" or other armed reconnaissance-type activity was included in any of the above.

5. The ROLLING THUNDER program then emerged, reflecting among other considerations the JCS recommendations of 11 February 1965 for initiating a systematic program of air strike pressures. Various considerations led to the concept that it would be initiated ostensibly with "reprisal" strikes associated with various incidents, but that this aspect would be faded out after the program got going.

6. ROLLING THUNDER 1 was scheduled on 20 February 1965 as a one-day reprisal strike by US and VNAF forces, against Quang Khe Naval Base and Vu Con Barracks, with two additional barracks and an airfield listed as weather alternates. ROLLING THUNDER 1 was cancelled because of a coup in Saigon. ROLLING THUNDER 2, 3, and 4 were then planned, also in the reprisal context, but subsequently cancelled due to nonavailability of VNAF forces (on alert for the Saigon coup), because simultaneous participation was prescribed for political reasons.

7. First actual ROLLING THUNDER strike was ROLLING THUNDER 5, a one-day, no recycle strike on 2 March 1965. Targets were one ammo depot and one naval base as primary US and VNAF targets, and four barracks as weather alternates. VNAF participation mandatory. This comprised the total approved effort for the week, substantially below the level recommended by the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

8. Additional details as to targets struck and dates, weights of effort, results, etc., on these and later dates may be found in the DIA "DRV Target Analysis." The following paragraphs therefore touch primarily the operational highlights.

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9. ROLLING THUNDER 6 was another one-day fixed-target program representing a week's weight of attack. Napalm was authorized for the first time, but aircraft recycle continued prohibited, for unknown reasons other than military.

10. ROLLING THUNDER 7 relaxed the mandatory one-day strike execution to a week's period, 19-25 March, and included five primary targets with weather alternates. The requirement for concurrent timing of US and VNAF strikes was removed. One US and two VNAF armed recce missions were authorized during the seven-day period, on specified route segments in the southern DRV, and authority to strike three fixed radar sites located one on each route was included.

11. ROLLING THUNDER 8, 26 March - 1 April, included nine radar sites for US strike, and a barracks for VNAF. The radar targets reflected primarily policy-level interest in additional purely military targets in southern DRV, as they are not lucrative targets, operationally, in a program being attempted under arbitrary restrictions on weight of effort. Three armed recce missions were again authorized, against specified route segments, during the period with US armed recce conducted against DRV patrol craft and along coast from Tiger Island north to 20° to include restrike against operational radar sites. VNAF armed recce along Route 12 from Ha Tinh to two miles east of Mu Gia Pass.

12. ROLLING THUNDER 9 (2-8 April) inaugurated a planned LOC interdiction campaign against the DRV south of Latitude 20°N. The Dong Phuong (JCS 18.8) and Thanh Hoa bridges (JCS 14) were the northernmost fixed-target cuts in this campaign, to be followed by additional cuts, plus armed reconnaissance to sustain the interdiction. ROLLING THUNDER 9 (2-8 April) through ROLLING THUNDER 12 (23-29 April) completed the fixed cuts recommended for accomplishment in two weeks, of 26 bridges and seven ferries.

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a. ROLLING THUNDER 9 was allowed three armed recce missions on specified route segments. This was increased to not more than 24 armed recce strike sorties per 24-hour period in ROLLING THUNDER 10 through ROLLING THUNDER 12 (still far short of a level of effort required for significant effectiveness in the area concerned).

b. From the start of ROLLING THUNDER recce through ROLLING THUNDER 9, armed recce targets were limited to locomotives, rolling stock, vehicles, and hostile DRV craft. For ROLLING THUNDER 10 through ROLLING THUNDER 12 the rules were changed to provide day and night armed recce missions to obtain high level of damage to military movement facilities, ferries, radar sites, secondary bridges, railroad rolling stock, and to interdict the LOCs by cratering, blockage and restriking and reseeding blockage points as necessary for sustained effectiveness of interdiction.

c. Armed recce geographical coverage, from the beginning limited to specified segments of designated routes, had increased by ROLLING THUNDER 9 to one-time coverage of Routes 1 (DMZ to 19-58-36N), 7, and 8. In ROLLING THUNDER 10 through ROLLING THUNDER 12 this was further extended to cover Routes 1 (to 19-58-36N), 7, 8, 15, 101 and lateral roads between these routes.

d. The dropping of unexpended ordnance on Tiger Island was authorized in this period, as the alternative to the prior requirement to jettison in the sea.

13. ROLLING THUNDER 13 (30 April - 6 May 1965) through ROLLING THUNDER 18 (11-17 June) continued US and VNAF strikes against 53 fixed military targets (five restrikes) as follows: six ammo depots, five supply depots, 21 barracks, two airfields, two POL storages, two radio facilities, seven

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bridges, two naval bases, one RR yard, one SAM site, two thermal power plants, one port facility and one ferry (see DIA Target Analysis for identifications), and intensified armed recce weight of effort without however extending its area. It was apparent to the JCS that fixed barracks and depots had by now been vacated, so that political insistence on hitting only military targets south of Latitude 20° was constraining the program substantially short of effectiveness.

a. During this six-week period armed recce sorties were expanded to a maximum allowed rate of 40 per day and a maximum of 200 per week (60 additional armed recce sorties were authorized for ROLLING THUNDER 17).

Enclosure B shows the armed recce weight of effort history for this and other periods. Although this period saw a significant increase, the new level was well below both capabilities and requirements for effectiveness, and it came long after the possibility of tactical surprise had been dissipated by the initial armed recces limited to fractions of an adequate effort.

b. Air strikes against fixed targets and armed recce were suspended over NVN for asserted political purposes during five day period (13-17 May).

c. With ROLLING THUNDER 13 armed recce authorizations changed from stated routes, etc., to more broadly defined geographical areas, in this case the area south of 20°. Enclosure A shows this and other armed recce area changes, those before ROLLING THUNDER 13 applying actually only to specified routes rather than the full areas as shown.

d. Although ROLLING THUNDER 15 included air strikes against one DRV SAM site, subsequent ROLLING THUNDER missions during this period directed that DRV SAM sites be avoided

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and not attacked. The latter conflict with military prudence and logic was prescribed for asserted political reasons.

e. Armed recce targets were expanded during this six week period to include railroad rolling stock, trucks, ferries, lighters, barges, radar sites, secondary bridges, road repair equipment, DRV naval craft, bivouac and maintenance areas. Emphasis was placed on armed recce of routes emanating from Vinh in order to restrict traffic in and out of this important LOC hub. ROLLING THUNDER 18 added the provision that authorized day armed route recce sorties could include selected missions to conduct small precise attacks against prebriefed military targets not in the JCS target list, and thereafter conduct armed route recce with residual capability.

f. ROLLING THUNDER 14 added authority for returning aircraft to use unexpended ordnance on Hon Nieu Island Radar Site, Hon Matt Island Radar Site, Dong Hoi Barracks, or rail and highway LOCs targets, in addition to Ile du Tigre previously authorized for this purpose.

14. ROLLING THUNDER 19 (18-24 June) through ROLLING THUNDER 21 (2-8 July) scheduled US and VNAF air strikes against a total of 24 fixed targets (seven restrikes) as follows: 11 barracks, three supply depots, three ammo depots, two airfields, two radar sites, two bridges, and one POL. Targets No. 25, Son La Barracks, and 26, Dien Bien Phu Barracks, included in these, are large widely dispersed targets containing many separate structures and requiring several hundred sorties for a high level of destruction. To preserve some expected political facade the military effectiveness of attack on these targets was degraded by limiting attacks to 80 strike sorties against either in any ROLLING THUNDER weekly period. ROLLING THUNDER 20

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included restrike of Dong Hoi and Vinh airfields, observed to be under reconstruction.

a. ROLLING THUNDER 21 expanded the armed recce sortie limit from 40 per day, 200 per week, to a maximum 250 sorties per week with weight of effort and timing to be at discretion of CINCPAC. Separate requests for additional armed recce sorties in certain circumstances were approved in a number of cases in this and later periods.

b. These ROLLING THUNDERS added extensions to the northwest of the armed recce area as shown in Enclosure A. These armed recce area extensions continued the previous pattern in which armed recce area extensions followed the locations of the fixed targets authorized for strike during previous missions.

c. Specific rules were incorporated prohibiting attack of DRV SAM sites or MIG airbases, again this violation of military prudence and logic being imposed for asserted political reasons.

15. With ROLLING THUNDER 22/23 (9-22 July) there began the practice of authorizing two-week packages, the two-week periods being given two ROLLING THUNDER numbers to simplify continuing statistical comparisons, etc. Some additional operational planning flexibility was thus accorded the operational commanders, as compared to the earlier one week cycles, but there remain several arbitrary operational problems caused by this authorization procedure.

16. ROLLING THUNDER 22/23 (9-22 July) through ROLLING THUNDER 32/33 (17-30 September) struck a total of 61 fixed targets (27 restrikes) as follows: 26 barracks, 13 ammo depots, two port facilities, seven bridges, two explosive plants, two thermal power plants, six supply depots, one hydroelectric power plant, one lock and one POL.

a. During this 12-week period, armed recce sortie limits changed with ROLLING THUNDER 26/27 from 500 to 600 sorties per two-week period, 1000 for ROLLING THUNDER 28/29, and 1200 for ROLLING THUNDER 30/31 and ROLLING THUNDER 32/33. A number of additional sorties were requested and authorized.

b. The armed recce area was extended northwest and north to follow fixed target strike areas, remaining 30 NM from the Communist China border. This 30 NM buffer was prescribed from political sources as an intended safeguard against military operational hazards not acknowledged in the military community.

c. Armed recce targets specified in ROLLING THUNDER 18 were expanded in ROLLING THUNDER 22/23 and ROLLING THUNDER 24/25 by the provision that airfields and JCS numbered LOC targets which has been assigned in previous ROLLING THUNDER strikes, and were observed to be under repair, were authorized for strike to keep them non-operational. To this was added in ROLLING THUNDER 26/27 "naval craft berthing areas." The restrike limitation on these three categories was expanded in ROLLING THUNDER 30/31, withdrawn in ROLLING THUNDER 32/33, and reinstated in ROLLING THUNDER 34/35, with authorization for armed recce strike on JCS numbered targets assigned in previous ROLLING THUNDER strikes, and lying within the armed recce area.

d. The expected SAM attacks against our aircraft began during ROLLING THUNDER 17, launched from their politically assured sanctuary. It was soon apparent the SAM battalions were using mobile ambush tactics. Not until ROLLING THUNDER 28/29 were ROLLING THUNDER sorties authorized to strike SAM systems, and then only those found within the authorized ROLLING THUNDER armed recce area.

e. ROLLING THUNDER 24/25 introduced the provision that returning ROLLING THUNDER aircraft which would be overflying Laos, were authorized to use unexpended ordnance to attack RLAF targeted road segments in Laos. ROLLING THUNDER 30/31 introduced the converse of this for BARREL ROLL and STEEL TIGER missions (Laos), with authority for weather alternate targets in the ROLLING THUNDER area.

f. Before these relaxations, strict Washington rules did not allow this operational logic. With ROLLING THUNDER 28/29 the targets authorized for unexpended ordnance were expanded to include eight named large barracks/headquarters complexes.

17. ROLLING THUNDER 34/35 (1-14 October) through ROLLING THUNDER 36/37 (15-28 October), which for the first time authorized attacks against the primary land LOCs to the northeast of Hanoi, included strikes against a total of only 10 fixed targets (of which one was a restrike), as follows: seven bridges, one ammo depot, one supply area, and one barracks area. This represented a marked reduction of effort against fixed targets, in contrast to the recommendations of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, reflecting apparent political concerns over adequate anti-LOC actions. The recommendation by the Joint Chiefs of Staff to extend armed recce to the areas northeast of Hanoi in both these ROLLING THUNDER proposals was disapproved for similar political reasons the rationale for which was not apparent.

18. ROLLING THUNDER 38/39, scheduled 29 October to 11 November, adds six more fixed targets and continues the armed recce program under the previously established limits. Again, the targets are along the LOCs leading from Hanoi to the northeast, east and south. In addition, at long last an SA-2 SAM

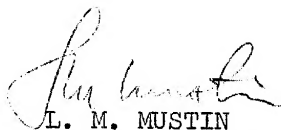
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facility within the 30 NM circle of Hanoi was included -- a first both as to type of target and strike entry within this politically assured Hanoi sanctuary.o

19. Enclosure C provides a preliminary analysis which undertakes to correlate the above operational information (including additional details as appropriate) with an informal list of alleged casualties (presumably both military and civilian) resulting from US air strikes in the DRV. Several of these allegations appear baseless, most notably that of 500 casualties in Thanh Hoa at a time when the closest air strikes in the DRV had not come within 100 miles of the place. From this analysis, it would appear that at most some 76 killed and 108 wounded can be accorded some degree of credibility, out of the totals of 667 and 156, respectively, in the above listing. These credible totals from this particular list seem extremely low for the extended operations here described.

20. Enclosure D provides certain summarized information concerning armed reconnaissance operations.



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